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SUBJECT: COUNCIL OF MINISTERS APPROVES BULGARIA'S FOLLOW-ON MISSION IN IRAQ

Classified By: Amb. John Beyrle for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Council of Ministers voted February 2 to approve Bulgaria's new mission in Iraq to guard Iranian internees at Camp Ashraf located north of Baghdad. In announcing the decision, Defense Minister Bliznakov said, "The decision to dispatch this mission fully corresponds with our national interests and commitments to our coalition partners." We expect Parliament to approve the decision with the chief opposition coming from the extreme nationalist Ataka party. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In a conversation with Amb. Beyrle February 1, Prime Minister Stanishev said the follow-on mission had the full support of the three-party governing coalition (which has a solid majority in Parliament), as well as the center-right opposition parties. Nonetheless, he predicted that the far-right Ataka party deputies would provoke a sharp debate. Beyrle said he appreciated Stanishev's consistent public statements explaining the importance of continued Bulgarian involvement in bringing stability to Iraq. Recent polling data indicates strong public opposition to involvement in Iraq, particularly among voters in Stanishev's own party.

¶3. (U) According to Bulgarian law, the Parliamentary Defense Committee must review the proposal for the new mission within 15 days. The proposal must then be included on the Parliament's plenary session agenda along with a recommendation from the committee. Parliament will make the final decision by a simple majority of the members present. Only one reading is required. In December 2005, Bulgaria withdrew its 450-soldier contingent from Diwaniya Province following Parliament's passage of a resolution requiring the withdrawal by the end of 2005.

¶4. (C) In a February 1 meeting with the Ambassador, Bulgarian CHOD Kolev reiterated the military's strong support for continued military participation in the Coalition, observing that his forces had started preparing for the follow-on mission in November. He appreciated the visit by two U.S. military officers in January to help prepare the contingent, and was looking forward to the upcoming CENTCOM trainers' visit. He said he expected the contingent would be ready to deploy with all 154 members by mid-March.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The approval of a new mission in Iraq confirms a significant evolution in the position of the ruling Socialist Party, which only six months ago was campaigning strongly against further Bulgarian involvement in Iraq. It demonstrates that the Bulgarian government is willing to step up to tough decisions affecting our military partnership, even in the face of strong public opposition. Negative reaction may be somewhat defused by the Government's

"slow release" of this pending decision during the last month. Despite vigorous protests from the Ataka Party, which will be well covered by the media, the Government holds a majority in Parliament, and we anticipate quick approval.

END COMMENT.

Beyrle